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Chairman: Mr. Råsbrant (Vice-Chairman) ..... (Sweden)
Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions: Ms. McLurg

Contents

Agenda item 121: Pattern of conferences

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In the absence of Mr. Bródi (Hungary), Mr. Råsbrant (Sweden), Vice-Chairman, took the Chair.

The meeting was called to order at 10.15 a.m.

Agenda item 121: Pattern of conferences (A/63/32, A/63/94, A/63/119 and Corr.1 and Add.1 and A/63/509)

1. **Mr. Chuasoto** (Chairperson of the Committee on Conferences), introducing the report of the Committee on Conferences for 2008 (A/63/32) said that both the report and the draft resolution contained in annex I had been adopted by consensus. The report itself reflected the breadth of the discussion on all items, and the range of views presented was a testament to the efforts of the Committee on Conferences to achieve progress on some long-standing and very difficult issues.

2. Section I of the draft resolution would approve, subject to conditions in the draft resolution itself, the draft revised calendar of conferences and meetings of the United Nations for 2009, and would authorize the Committee on Conferences to make any adjustments to the calendar necessitated by actions and decisions of the General Assembly at its sixty-third session.

3. Section II A of the draft resolution dealt with the utilization of conference-servicing resources. The Committee on Conferences had noted that the overall utilization rate at the four main duty stations, unchanged in 2007 relative to its 2006 level of 83 per cent, remained above the established benchmark of 80 per cent. He had conducted consultations with the chairpersons and secretaries of the five bodies that had underutilized their resources for three consecutive years with a view to finding efficient ways and means of improving the situation. Three of those bodies were Main Committees of the General Assembly, whose utilization rates, at 72 to 75 per cent, could be brought up to the benchmark level with improvements in cancellations and late starts and early endings.

4. A number of overall solutions to underutilization had been proposed, including starting and ending meetings on time, and better planning of programmes of work to reduce the number of meetings requested. He had illustrated the impact of wasted conference services by quantifying it in monetary terms. With a quoted cost of $11,250 for one three-hour meeting with interpretation in six languages in New York, all bureaux and secretariats had agreed that underutilization must be avoided. Committee secretaries should stay in close contact with meeting planners in order to give advance notice of shortened meetings so that services could be reassigned, especially to meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States.

5. In order to further improve utilization rates, a three-pronged approach had been suggested: first, the Chairperson of the Committee on Conferences should continue to hold consultations with chairpersons, particularly incoming chairpersons of bodies which underutilized conference services; second, the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management should pursue its proactive approach at the planning stage; and, third, intergovernmental bodies should, to the extent possible, be more realistic in their requests for conference services.

6. For the first time, the Secretary-General's report on the pattern of conferences (A/63/119) had provided statistics on bodies entitled to meet "as required", indicating that 88 per cent of the meetings in question had been provided with services in 2007. The Committee on Conferences requested the Secretary-General to continue to report on that matter.

7. Turning to the provision of conference services for meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States, he said that the percentage of meetings provided with interpretation had increased from 76 per cent in 2006 to 84 per cent in 2007. The draft resolution requested the Secretary-General to continue to explore innovative ways to address the difficulties faced by Member States when conference services were absent.

8. The Committee on Conferences had noted with satisfaction that, in 2007, all meetings of Nairobi-based United Nations bodies had taken place in Nairobi, and had welcomed the promotional activities undertaken by the management of the United Nations Conference Centre at the Economic Commission for Africa, which had resulted in a continued increase in the utilization of its conference facilities in 2007.

9. Section II B of the draft resolution dealt with the impact of the capital master plan on meetings held at Headquarters during its implementation. Organizers and requesters were once again asked to liaise closely with the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management when scheduling meetings, so as to maximize predictability in coordinating activities

at Headquarters during the period of construction. Adequate information technology support for conference services should continue to be provided from within the Department's existing resources to ensure that those services could operate seamlessly throughout the implementation of the capital master plan.

10. Section III of the draft resolution addressed the issue of integrated global management. While noting with appreciation the initiatives undertaken to streamline procedures and achieve economies of scale, the Committee on Conferences requested that the next report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences should include information on the financial savings achieved through the integrated global management projects.

11. With regard to documentation and publication-related matters, addressed in section IV of the draft resolution, the Committee on Conferences noted unprecedented delays in issuance, which had severely affected the work of the General Assembly; it called on the Secretary-General to explore more effective accountability measures to ensure that authors and their senior managers provided for the timely issuance of documents in all six official languages, and to report to the General Assembly on that matter at its sixty-fourth session.

12. Recalling particularly the late submission of documents by author departments during the second part of the resumed sixty-second session of the General Assembly, the Committee on Conferences also requested the Secretary-General to enhance his efforts to address that matter, by means including the convening of a task force. Pending the submission to the General Assembly of the Secretary-General's report, the Committee on Conferences wished to receive, at its organizational session in 2009, an interim report on the results of consultations and action to resolve difficulties with the documentation relating to peacekeeping financing. The Fifth Committee would consider that interim report at the second part of the resumed sixty-third session of the General Assembly.

13. Section V of the draft resolution, devoted to translation and interpretation-related matters, took into account the report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) on the audit of the existing special arrangements governing the recruitment of temporary assistance staff in the language services across the four main duty stations, particularly from the standpoint of compliance with the relevant staff regulations and rules and General Assembly mandates in the field of human resources management.

14. The Committee on Conferences welcomed the initiative to seek a long-term solution to the high vacancy rates in the language services at the United Nations Office at Nairobi by engaging a consultant to explore enhanced training for potential professional translators and interpreters on the African continent, and requested the Secretary-General to report to the General Assembly on that subject at its sixty-fourth session. It also recognized the acute problems which the United Nations Office at Geneva faced in providing the required conference services and requested the Secretary-General to address the matter and make every effort to cope with the current surge in meetings.

15. Having noted that the intention of the General Assembly in adopting section VI, paragraph 1, of its resolution 57/305 had been to increase the availability of retired language staff for employment with the language services, the Committee on Conferences requested the Secretary-General to clarify and implement the provisions of that paragraph concerning the ceiling on United Nations earnings of United Nations language staff retirees.

16. The Committee on Conferences welcomed, and urged continuation of, the action taken by the Secretary-General to address more effectively the demographic situation and issue of succession planning, in particular by resorting to temporary assistance to deal with acute needs, by enhancing internal and external training programmes, by developing staff exchanges between organizations and by approaching institutions that trained language staff for international organizations.

17. Lastly, the Committee on Conferences requested the Secretary-General to report to the General Assembly at its sixty-fourth session on steps to enhance translation quality, in particular for contractual translation; on the experience, lessons learned and best practices of the main duty stations in performing quality control of contractual translations, including requirements relating to the number and appropriate level of the staff needed to carry out that function; and on the impact of freelance recruitment on the quality of interpretation at all duty stations.

18. **Mr. Shaaban** (Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management) said that he wished to focus on how the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management was addressing the challenges it currently faced, recalling that, in the context of the comprehensive reform of the United Nations begun more than six years previously, it had made significant changes to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the services it delivered to the Member States.

19. The report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences (A/63/119) highlighted progress in implementing the concept of integrated global management of conference services, as the Department continued to identify opportunities to standardize working methods across duty stations and to work towards increasing integration and sharing of resources where possible. Progress was reviewed and new opportunities discussed and agreed at the Department's annual coordination meeting of conference managers, and followed up according to the plan of action agreed during the meeting.

20. The Department continued to move forward with the global information technology initiative, comprising three discrete projects aimed at greater worldwide integration of its information system for conference management at United Nations Headquarters and the United Nations offices at Geneva, Nairobi and Vienna. The progress of those projects, each led by a different duty station, was discussed and monitored closely through regular videoconferences and extensive shared electronic workspaces. The requirement for Organization-wide coherence, without neglecting the specific features of each duty station, created a need for substantial collaboration which, while labour-intensive, had had encouraging results.

21. At Headquarters, more robust documentation planning practices had already had a positive impact, for example on the timeliness of submission and on the length of documents, with most author departments doing their best to compress their reports and ensure timely delivery to the Department. Recognizing that the situation still needed improvement, the Department was working actively with both author departments and the intergovernmental bodies, reminding them that, for proactive document management to produce the expected improvements, the document production workflow must be orderly.

22. The Secretariat was determined not to allow a recurrence of the problems experienced by the Fifth Committee with availability of documentation during the second part of the Assembly's resumed sixty-second session in 2008. The Department had joined with author departments and the secretariats of the Fifth Committee and the Advisory Committee to coordinate a series of meetings to evaluate the situation, identify problems and take corrective action to provide better services. The Committee on Conferences had endorsed that initiative, reflecting it in the wording of the draft resolution in its report, pending an interim report on the activities of the task force examining late submission of documentation. While the Department did its utmost to serve all intergovernmental forums, documents of inordinate length, submitted late, or even wholly unexpectedly, disrupted even the best efficiency plans.

23. As in the rest of the Secretariat, significant numbers of staff in the Department would be retiring in the following four to five years, making succession planning an issue of considerable concern. The Department's problem was particularly acute because language staff could not be expected to be fully effective immediately on recruitment. It was crucial for newly hired staff to be properly coached and trained by more senior staff because of the complexity of linguistic work and the specificity of the Organization's rules regarding the use of languages, its terminology, and so forth. At Headquarters in New York, the effect of large-scale retirements was compounded by the recent tendency of staff to transfer laterally to what were considered to be more attractive duty stations.

24. The structural solution to the problem of succession — a significant increase in the Department's intake of staff — was easier to achieve in theory than in practice. As before, the Department expressed concern at the insufficient capacity of the Office of Human Resources Management to implement swiftly the comprehensive recruitment processes required to identify, select and secure the required high-quality staff, especially in the language services, where recruitment was exclusively through international competitive examinations. The risk remained that the demographic transition in progress could jeopardize the quality of service on which the Member States relied.

25. Rather than idly standing by in the face of that situation, the Department was in constant contact with the Office of Human Resources Management in order to plan ahead and arrange more frequent competitive examinations. It had developed an outreach programme targeting a number of universities whose curricula included training tailored to the requirements of the United Nations language services. Only recently, memorandums of understanding had been signed with Herzen University in Saint Petersburg, the Beijing Foreign Studies University and the Shanghai International Studies University. Contacts were also being pursued with universities in Arabic-speaking countries, in Africa, in Spain and Latin America, and in the French-speaking community through the International Organization of La Francophonie.

26. While those, and related, efforts would in due course improve the recruitment of the most promising language professionals for all languages, the Department could not delay action until that result was achieved, and therefore sought the assistance of the General Assembly for a three-pronged approach to address the situation until a new generation of language staff had joined the Organization and become fully operational. As an example of the problem, a shortage of interpreters had threatened to jeopardize the servicing of the International Conference on Financing for Development in Doha at the end of November 2008, which had coincided with peak demand at the sixty-third session of the General Assembly. Although, for obvious operational reasons, the Department usually relied on retired staff members to assist in such circumstances, at the end of any given year most retired staff who might be recruited on temporary appointments had reached the earnings ceiling endorsed by the General Assembly. Having considered the issue, the Advisory Committee had suggested that the Secretariat was in a position to provide a solution via a reinterpretation of the term "work days" within the context of the calculation of earnings. On the previous day, the Office of Human Resources Management had informed him of the alteration, presumably with immediate effect, of the restriction on employment of retired language staff, who could now be hired for up to 125 worked days. However, that was no more than a palliative, and failed to fully address the succession challenges facing the Department.

27. The first part of the Department's proposed three-pronged approach was to request the Committee on Conferences, the Office of Human Resources Management and the General Assembly to agree to a waiver of the earnings ceiling to address the immediate problem. The second part of the approach was to request the General Assembly to increase the earnings ceiling permanently to 185 work days per year, in order to be able to make more extensive use of retired staff in the medium term, given that the Secretariat would be unable to organize the number of competitive examinations for language staff that the Department required to replenish depleted language rosters. The third part of the approach was to examine the mandatory retirement age. Requiring United Nations staff to retire at 62, or even 60, made little sense in the modern world. The United States and Canada, to take only two examples, no longer had a compulsory retirement age. The European Union's retirement age for language staff was 65. It was surely more practical to stagger the imminent retirement of so many of the Department's language staff, thereby affording it time to recruit and train the retirees' successors and ensuring the transmission of precious institutional memory.

28. In summary, his requests to the Fifth Committee were to approve a waiver of the ceiling on the earnings of language retirees hired by the Department until the end of 2009, to consider a permanent increase in the ceiling for the years to come, up to 185 work days, and/or to examine the possibility of waiving the current retirement age for all language staff until the wave of retirements was over and suitable replacements had been recruited.

29. The capital master plan threatened to have a considerable impact on the Department's work. While the newly adopted accelerated strategy would shorten the overall renovation time, it would inevitably increase the potential for disruption. He wished to reassure the Committee that there would be sufficient conference facilities to accommodate all core activities of intergovernmental organs and bodies that normally met at Headquarters in accordance with the calendar of conferences. However, there would temporarily be fewer conference facilities available for parallel meetings, side events and similar occasions. The Department's staff would be scattered across five locations, within reasonably easy reach of the Secretariat building but still not as close by or as close to each other as desirable or as originally foreseen.

Accommodation for temporary staff would also be inadequate. While the Department's staff were resilient and would do their best to provide the required high-quality services, those working conditions might affect their ability to deliver all mandated outputs in a timely fashion at times of peak demand. All the planning and processing sections would make every effort to avoid service disruption, including through the use of alternative work methods, where feasible.

30. A related, but as yet unresolved, issue was the increase in staffing required by the Department's Information and Communication Technology Service, which was expected to ensure that over a dozen mission-critical systems performed without disruption during the entire renovation process, and across a multiplicity of locations. He therefore renewed his appeal to the Fifth Committee to approve adequate permanent Professional staff for the Information and Communication Technology Service in the upcoming critical period of the capital master plan, by means including provision in the 2010-2011 budget for one P-4 and two P-2 posts.

31. The performance of the Department, as the Organization's primary service provider, could only be judged by its clients. The members of the Fifth Committee were therefore requested to complete the annual survey on conference management. In addition, delegations were invited to transmit their views by filling in feedback forms kept by the meetings servicing assistants in all conference rooms. The information thus obtained would enable the Department to provide even better service.

32. **Mr. Belov** (Programme Planning and Budget Division), drawing attention to rule 153 of the rules of procedure of the General Assembly, made an oral statement of programme budget implications arising from section V, paragraphs 8, 17 and 19, of the draft resolution on pattern of conferences contained in annex I to the report of the Committee on Conferences (A/63/32).

33. The issues referred to in paragraph 8 would be reviewed and reported on in accordance with established budgetary procedures during the current biennium; the matters referred to in paragraph 17 would be considered in the context of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2010-2011; and any future financial implications arising in connection with paragraph 19 would be reported to the General Assembly at its sixty-fourth session. Accordingly, at the current stage, no programme budget implications would arise for the biennium 2008-2009.

34. **Ms. Ndiaye** (Office of Internal Oversight Services), introducing the report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services on the audit of the existing special arrangements governing the recruitment of temporary assistance staff in the language services across the four main duty stations (A/63/94), said that, under the special arrangements for temporary assistance in the language services, the posts in question were funded primarily by the regular budget through a unique funding mechanism established specifically to supplement the permanent conference-servicing resources of United Nations Headquarters and the United Nations offices at Geneva, Nairobi and Vienna. The conditions of service for language specialists were governed by General Assembly resolutions 59/265, 60/236 B, 61/236 and 62/225, the United Nations Staff Regulations and Rules, and the agreements between the United Nations and the International Association of Conference Translators (AITC) and the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC).

35. The audit had found that there was no global approach to managing the recruitment of temporary assistance staff in the language services. In addition, there were no clear criteria, guidelines or standard operating procedures, usable by all duty stations, for the recruitment and management of temporary assistance staff. In the view of OIOS, the lack of guidelines and standardized procedures could result in non-compliance with the relevant resolutions of the General Assembly regarding equity in recruitment and the United Nations agreements on conditions of service with AITC and AIIC.

36. As a result of the lack of adequate procedures and the consequent lack of transparency and consistency in rostering and selecting candidates, OIOS had been unable to establish whether temporary assistance staff recruited by all language services were given equal treatment and provided with equally favourable working conditions and resources. At United Nations Headquarters, the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management had not established appropriate procedures usable by all duty stations to determine the professional domicile of temporary assistance staff. Consequently, in a number of cases in New York, Geneva and Vienna, contracts for temporary

assistance staff were based on local conditions of service even though the staff were recruited from countries outside the duty stations concerned. The pattern of recruitment of temporary assistance staff for the language services at those duty stations showed that some of the language services preferred to recruit candidates under local conditions of service mainly because managers were concerned about cost-effectiveness and efficiency. While all four duty stations implemented capacity planning to determine their requirements for temporary assistance staff, there was no global planning process in place and the approach to the frequency of planning, the relevance of the data used in planning and the evaluation of capacity plans differed from one duty station to another. The Department had informed OIOS that an integrated global management project aimed at coordinating procedures, standardizing practices and sharing resources across four conference-servicing duty stations was in progress.

37. A total of six recommendations had been made to the Department, including implementation of standard operating procedures for determining the professional domicile and hence the conditions of service of temporary assistance staff in the language services; reviewing and updating the agreements with AITC and AIIC to ensure their alignment with the relevant General Assembly resolutions and the United Nations Staff Regulations and Rules; and establishing centrally managed rosters of candidates and related procedures to be used by all language services. The Department had accepted all the OIOS recommendations and was in the process of implementing them.

38. **Mr. Kelapile** (Vice-Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions), introducing the related report of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions (A/63/509), said that the Advisory Committee welcomed the efforts by the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management to ensure optimal quality of conference management services in a cost-effective manner and the improvements in cooperation between duty stations. The transfer of information technology applications developed by the Department had enabled the regional commissions to upgrade their conference-servicing applications. The Advisory Committee had also noted the progress in implementing the integrated global conference management system and requested the Secretary-General to include, in his next report on the pattern of conferences, information about the financial savings the system was helping to achieve. The Advisory Committee stressed that the efforts to optimize efficiency gains should continue.

39. With regard to the impact of the capital master plan on conference services, it was imperative that the servicing of meetings held at Headquarters should continue without interruption. The Chief Information Technology Officer must be involved to ensure that established information technology standards, policies and procedures were followed.

40. The Advisory Committee was concerned about the slow pace of recruitment to fill vacant conference services posts at the United Nations Office at Geneva and the chronic high vacancy rate in the interpretation section at the United Nations Office at Nairobi. It also requested that the underlying reasons for delays in filling vacancies in certain areas of conference servicing should be analysed and included in the subsequent report on the pattern of conferences.

41. In the light of the anticipated high turnover of staff in the language services, the Advisory Committee recommended that the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management should engage with its partners in the Examinations and Tests Section of the Office of Human Resources Management to better plan for filling those vacancies by holding competitive examinations as early as possible. In that connection, the planned revamping of the examination process and the outreach activities being conducted were highly important.

42. On the subject of publishing, the Advisory Committee encouraged the Secretary-General to continue his efforts to improve the utilization and sharing of capacity and to increase the use of internal printing capacity.

43. Lastly, the present report should be considered in conjunction with the Advisory Committee's first report on the proposed budget programme for the biennium 2008-2009 (A/62/7), the report of the Committee on Conferences for 2008 (A/63/32) and relevant General Assembly resolutions.

44. **Mr. Hunte** (Antigua and Barbuda), speaking on behalf of the Group of 77 and China, said that the quality of conference services was very important to the Group and that the draft resolution on the pattern of

conferences submitted by the Committee on Conferences would provide a sound basis for the work of the Fifth Committee. He hoped that the current satisfactory overall utilization rate of conference services, above the benchmark of 80 per cent, would be maintained and improved. He noted the utilization rate of 100 per cent recorded in Nairobi and the positive trend at the Economic Commission for Africa.

45. Citing the terms of reference of the Committee on Conferences, set out in General Assembly resolution 43/222 B, he wished to know whether the Secretary-General's initiative to invite the Group of Eight to hold a summit meeting at United Nations Headquarters had been submitted to that Committee before being announced.

46. The Group was concerned about the use of United Nations premises by a few States for activities that failed to maintain the impartiality of the Organization or to respect its purposes and principles, thus creating the perception of possible misuse. He sought clarification from the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management concerning the administrative arrangements for such meetings.

47. While the Group noted with appreciation the improvement in the percentage of meetings of regional groups — the importance of which had been recognized by the General Assembly — for which interpretation services had been provided, and welcomed the initiative to create a strategic reserve of three additional meetings per week to be used as required, a proper mechanism should be established to provide services for all meetings of major groupings on a permanent basis.

48. Recalling that the purpose of the integrated global management initiative was to ensure a balanced division of labour between Headquarters and other duty stations, with the goal of improving the quality of interpretation and translation, he emphasized that the unique aspects of each duty station and language group, and the principle of equal grade for equal work, must be respected, and that all such initiatives must comply with General Assembly resolutions.

49. Implementation of the accelerated capital master plan must not have an impact on the quality and availability of conference services or the equal treatment and working conditions of the language services. The Department for General Assembly and Conference Management should take measures to continue providing uninterrupted service while the plan was being implemented.

50. The late submission, processing and issuance of documents in all six official languages were long-standing problems that the Secretariat must address. Such delays had had an extremely adverse effect on the work of the Fifth Committee at the second part of the resumed sixty-second session. Despite some welcome improvements at the main part of the current session, the issuance of documents still failed to comply with the six-week rule. He also requested clarification from the Chairman of the Advisory Committee as to why issuance of its report (A/63/509) had been delayed, despite the fact that the Secretary-General's report (A/63/119) had been issued some two months earlier.

51. Noting with concern the challenges presented by the demographic situation in the language services, he welcomed the programme of outreach to universities and professional associations and called on the Secretariat to put in place a long-term solution to succession planning for those services.

52. Lastly, he drew the Committee's attention to an incident on 13 October 2008 in which several members of the Group of 77 had attempted to vote on a number of crucial resolutions in the Fourth Committee but had been informed that their votes would not be counted, even though the General Assembly had already adopted a resolution permitting them to vote for the duration of the sixty-third session. The Secretariat, which had not seemed to be aware of the matter, had later blamed it on the voting machines. The Group requested clarification from the Secretariat of what it considered a serious matter concerning the ability of Member States to exercise their rights and privileges in the United Nations.

53. **Ms. Tabouri** (France), speaking on behalf of the European Union; the candidate countries Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Turkey; the stabilization and association process countries Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia; and, in addition, Armenia, Georgia, Iceland, Liechtenstein, the Republic of Moldova, Norway and Ukraine, welcomed the steps being taken under the global management initiative to harmonize procedures, realize economies of scale and improve the quality of conference services. She encouraged the Department to actively pursue all of the reform initiatives.

54. The work of intergovernmental and expert bodies depended on the application of rigorous criteria in the language services and the availability of adequate conference facilities. The Secretary-General must ensure that the implementation of the capital master plan was compatible with the high quality of conference services that Member States had a right to expect.

55. In the light of the unprecedented delays experienced in 2008 in the submission and issuance of documents, which had severely impeded the work of the General Assembly, the European Union urged the Secretariat to intensify its efforts to rectify the problem, particularly for documents considered by the Fifth Committee.

56. While she acknowledged the improvements achieved at many duty stations, much remained to be done to improve the situation at several United Nations offices. She welcomed the Secretary-General's efforts to deal with the challenges of the demographic situation and succession planning in the language services through the hiring of temporary assistance, staff exchanges and training, and outreach to educational institutions. The European Union was prepared to adopt the report of the Committee on Conferences and the draft resolution contained in annex I.

57. **Mr. Davide** (Philippines) said that conference management — the provision of interpretation, translation and documentation — was vital in facilitating the meeting of minds that resulted in the resolutions and decisions of United Nations bodies. Conference servicing had been instrumental in constructing the three pillars of peace and security, development and human rights. His delegation supported efforts to continue improving conference services and appreciated the guidance provided by the Committee on Conferences.

58. The late submission of documents was a pressing issue that affected the work of the Fifth Committee in particular by necessitating the rescheduling of meetings and consideration of a large volume of documentation at the end of the session. He hoped that the search for a permanent solution to the problem would continue.

59. In the light of the alarming forecast in the Secretary-General's preceding report on the pattern of conferences (A/62/161) that some 25 per cent of language staff would retire in the five-year period from 2007 to 2011, his delegation supported efforts to address the issue through competitive examinations, staff training and exchange programmes, outreach to language training institutions, and a possible traineeship programme to attract young language professionals to a career at the United Nations.

60. **Ms. Pataca** (Angola), speaking on behalf of the African Group, said that the African Group was pleased to note that, pursuant to General Assembly resolution 57/283 B, the Nairobi-based bodies had continued to hold their meetings in Nairobi. Although that was positive, it was important to continue to employ aggressive marketing strategies to attract additional clients.

61. It was disappointing that the vacancy rate in the interpretation section at the Nairobi office appeared to have settled at 35 per cent. Furthermore, unlike at other duty stations, there were no P-5 posts in the language services and not all Translator/Reviser posts were funded from regular budget resources. The Group perceived that as differential treatment and a deliberate effort to undermine the effectiveness of the Nairobi office. It noted the Secretary-General's comment that the possibility of attracting good language staff would be enhanced by making available posts at a higher level and would seek information on that point.

62. The Group welcomed the development of the integrated conference management system, intended to bring transparency to operational data across all duty stations, and hoped that the system would help to eliminate inequalities among duty stations.

63. As a result of promotional efforts, partnerships and marketing initiatives by the Centre's management, the utilization rate for the Conference Centre at the Economic Commission for Africa had risen from 42.23 per cent in 2005 to 69.34 per cent in 2007. The Group welcomed that improvement, as well as the ongoing efforts to develop linkages with other centres, with a view to increasing the utilization of the Centre. It noted that the management team had marketed the Centre at selected high-profile international conventions but recommended that the impact of such initiatives should be carefully assessed.

64. Lastly, the African Group was pleased that a senior reviser had been assigned to the Commission in exchange for a P-3 translator and hoped that similar measures would be taken in the future.

65. **Ms. Pham** (United States of America) commended the Committee on Conferences for putting forward a consensus draft resolution and urged all Member States to support it.

66. Her delegation welcomed the ongoing efforts by the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management to maximize efficiency and cost-effectiveness without compromising the quality of its services and was confident that that quality would not diminish during the implementation of the capital master plan.

67. While taking note that the overall utilization of conference resources had remained at 83 per cent, above the established benchmark of 80 per cent, her delegation was concerned that the utilization rate at Headquarters stood at 79 per cent. It urged the Department to continue to pursue appropriate measures to ensure optimum utilization and fully supported the provision in the draft resolution whereby secretariats and bureaux were invited to pay attention to avoiding late starts and unplanned early endings.

68. Her delegation acknowledged the Secretariat's ongoing efforts to ensure timely submission, processing and issuance of documentation and supported the provision in the draft resolution whereby the Secretary-General was requested to reconvene the task force to study the matter; to provide an interim report on documentation concerning peacekeeping financing; to report on the results of the consultations and actions taken to solve the problem to the General Assembly through the Committee on Conferences at its organizational session in 2009, in order for the Fifth Committee to consider the report at the second part of the resumed session; and to provide a comprehensive report to the General Assembly at its sixty-fourth session through the Committee on Conferences.

69. Although the Department had taken steps to streamline its operations, it must continue to increase efficiency, and to reduce the cost of meetings. The implementation of the global information technology project, which was aimed at integrating, across duty stations, information technology into meetings management and documentation-processing systems, was a step in the right direction.

70. **Mr. Diab** (Syrian Arab Republic) said that his delegation attached particular importance to the pattern of conferences since it pertained to the essential work of delegations. He was concerned that, despite the importance of the timely issuance of documents in the six official languages, which had a direct impact on the efficiency of the work done by the various United Nations bodies, the six-week rule, the subject of a number of General Assembly resolutions, was frequently disregarded. He noted in that connection the proposal to convene a Secretariat working group to discuss the problem of the timely issuance of documents, hoped that the working group would reach tangible conclusions, and emphasized the importance of making documents available simultaneously in all official languages on the United Nations website.

71. His delegation welcomed the efforts of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management to increase the percentage of meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States for which interpretation services were provided and also welcomed the initiative to increase by three the strategic reserve of meetings to be convened on an "as required" basis.

72. The implementation of the capital master plan must not have an adverse effect on the quality of conference services, on the equal use of the six official languages of the Organization, or on the working conditions of the language staff.

73. The objectives of integrated global management — to enhance efficiency and to harmonize practices and procedures across the four headquarters duty stations — must be borne in mind. In introducing changes in methods of work, the unique nature of the language services must be taken into account.

74. In connection with the interpretation and translation services, he drew attention to the importance of the standardization and development of terminology through coordination between those services.

75. His delegation was deeply concerned to note the demographic transition affecting the language services referred to in the Secretary-General's report (A/63/119). He urged the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management to take the necessary measures to rectify the situation with regard to the shortfall in staff, in particular through the holding of international competitive examinations, and further urged it to work with the Office of Human Resources Management to make arrangements for such examinations. He supported the use of retirees and the proposed raising of the ceiling on their United Nations

earnings so that they would be more readily available for short-term contracts. It was also important to train new staff members to take on more responsible duties as language staff retired and he welcomed the efforts of the Secretariat to contact universities and schools of interpretation and translation with a view to the employment of graduates of those establishments, particularly in the Arab world.

76. In conclusion, his delegation noted with deep concern the use of United Nations premises by certain Member States for activities that did not respect the neutrality of the Organization and ran counter to its objectives and principles. The matter warranted particular attention because such activities created the impression that United Nations premises could be misused in a manner that was detrimental to the interests of some Member States. His delegation considered that the explanation offered by the Secretariat was difficult to defend.

77. **Mr. Chumakov** (Russian Federation) said that successful implementation of the integrated global conference management system would lead to a balanced division of labour between United Nations Headquarters and other duty stations. Reform of the working methods of the language services must preserve the unique nature of those services and should be designed to improve the quality of interpretation and translation. That quality in turn depended on the provision of equally favourable working conditions and resources for all language services, as provided for, inter alia, by General Assembly resolution 61/266 on multilingualism.

78. Examinations should be held quickly in order to replenish the rosters of candidates to fill vacancies. The examinations were unlikely to place an inordinate burden on the Office of Human Resources Management, since the language services themselves did most of the work involved.

79. He appreciated the biannual information meetings at which delegations were kept abreast of issues in the language services and the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management received direct feedback from its target audience. As in the past, the Russian delegation was concerned about the unsatisfactory quality of interpretation from Russian to English, which was particularly deplorable when it was based on written statements distributed in advance. That shortcoming was evidence not only of insufficient knowledge of Russian but also of inadequate preparation for meetings.

80. The initiatives taken to foster active contact with educational institutions in order to attract qualified language staff and enhance the prestige of employment at the United Nations were commendable and should be part of the strategic planning, based on the rational use of resources, for future competitive examinations.

81. He looked forward to receiving information on the outcome of the Secretariat's efforts to improve quality control of contractual translation. He was concerned about the lack of transparency, consistency and parity in the hiring of temporary assistance staff and supported the recommendation of the Office of Internal Oversight Services in its report on the audit of the arrangements governing the recruitment of temporary assistance staff (A/63/94) that the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management should identify the criteria and guidelines for selecting freelance and temporary staff.

82. Implementation of the capital master plan must not negatively affect the provision of language services by the Secretariat. In that connection, he had been perplexed by initiatives such as the installation of fire doors and the "Cool United Nations" initiative, which had been taken just prior to the start of the capital master plan without substantial justification or an intergovernmental mandate. The views of Member States on that issue, as set out in resolutions, should be noted.

83. **Mr. Farooq** (Pakistan) said that implementation of the global information technology initiative in the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management would improve the quality of conference and document services, which were vital to the work of the Organization. He underlined that the technology installed at all duty stations must be compatible, and requested that future reports of the Secretary-General should contain information on the financial savings achieved through the initiative.

84. While overall utilization of conference facilities had remained at 83 per cent since the previous year, the figure for New York had decreased from 83 per cent in 2005 to 79 per cent in 2007, below the benchmark of 80 per cent. Although the servicing of meetings of regional and other major groupings had increased markedly, from 76 per cent in 2006 to 84 per cent in 2007, there was room for further improvement, since

those figures were far below the level achieved five years earlier, when 98 per cent of such meetings had been serviced.

85. To ensure the efficient use of conference resources, meetings should be convened punctually. Furthermore, adequate budgetary resources must be provided to enable the Fifth Committee to do its work. His delegation was also concerned about the high vacancy rate in the language services and welcomed the efforts being made by the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management to rectify the situation.

86. The late issuance of documents was a problem that made it especially difficult for small delegations to consider reports. The rate of compliance with the rules on timely submission showed no improvement, having remained unchanged in New York at 65 per cent. He wished to know, furthermore, why the compliance rate for submission in Geneva was only 37 per cent, and emphasized the need for transparency and accountability in the matter.

87. Lastly, he encouraged all those who wished to make requests for meetings at Headquarters during implementation of the capital master plan to confer with the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management.

88. **Mr. Cumberbatch** Miguén (Cuba) said that the Organization could not conduct its business without the necessary information; it was time to resolve the long-standing problem of late submission of documents once and for all.

89. He was pleased that conference services were being provided to regional and other groups and reiterated that regional discussion was a fundamental part of the Organization's decision-making process.

90. His delegation was deeply concerned that certain Member States had used United Nations premises to malign other Member States. That was a violation of the rules of procedure and undermined confidence in the Secretariat officials who permitted it. The Non-Aligned Movement had communicated its disapproval of such events to the Secretary-General on several occasions.

91. He welcomed the Secretariat's efforts to reach out to language training institutions and hoped that those efforts would be extended to universities throughout the Spanish-speaking world. Since Spanish was spoken in a large number of countries, it was important that the Organization's translators and interpreters should take into account all modern nuances.

92. **Mr. Safaei** (Islamic Republic of Iran) said that the Department's main objective should be to ensure optimal conference servicing, based on respect for and equal treatment of all Member States. In that connection, he shared the Non-Aligned Movement's concern that United Nations premises were being used by a few States for activities that undermined the Organization's dignity and objectivity. Apparently, the Department was not sufficiently sensitive to the spirit of constructive intergovernmental cooperation. The Fifth Committee and the General Assembly must lay down firm guidelines to disabuse Member States and non-governmental organizations of the notion that United Nations facilities could be used to conduct politically sensitive activities against another Member State.

93. **Mr. Shen** Yanjie (China) said that his delegation appreciated the Department's efforts to improve the quality and integrated management of conference services. It noted the statement in the Secretary-General's report that there were a number of external factors beyond the Department's control which continued to impact the efficient utilization of its resources and was pleased that the Department had decided to undertake a study of those factors.

94. He noted the demographic transition in the language services and commended the Department for holding competitive examinations to fill vacancies and introducing training programmes for new recruits and freelancers.

95. Lastly, he was pleased that the Department was actively studying ways to ensure efficient conference servicing and equal working conditions for all language staff during the implementation of the capital master plan.

96. **Mr. Shaaban** (Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management) reiterated that the Department would do its utmost to avoid disruption during the implementation of the capital master plan; however, owing to the fact that the Department's staff would be scattered over five locations, incidents were bound to occur.

97. It was the Member States, not the Secretariat, who were responsible for the underutilization of

conference services. With regard to the servicing of regional groups, he recalled that seven thematic debates had been held during the sixty-second session of the General Assembly. Three of those had had evening sessions and two or three had had round tables. The General Assembly itself had approved those thematic debates, which had made it difficult for the Department to provide conference servicing to the regional and other groups.

98. In April 1996, the Secretary-General had issued an administrative instruction (ST/AI/416) setting forth the rules for use of United Nations premises. Any Member State wishing to use the premises must inform the Department of the nature of the meeting, the programme, the sponsors and the number of participants. Authorization was granted only when all the requirements were met. The Department had turned down requests where, for example, the Member State's name had been included in the title. Obviously, whatever took place inside the room was beyond the Department's control.

99. In reply to the comment by the representative of Cuba regarding outreach to universities, he pointed out that, four months earlier, a letter had been sent to all missions requesting them to suggest names of language institutions. The Mission of Cuba had not responded to that request.

100. Regarding the Fourth Committee, the General Assembly had adopted the resolution permitting the delegations concerned to vote on the same day that the Fourth Committee had held the meeting in question. As a result, there had been no time to update the voting machines used by that Committee. The Secretary of the Fourth Committee had requested the delegations concerned to register their votes in the General Assembly when the Fourth Committee resolution came before it.

101. He acknowledged the European Union's willingness to support the draft resolution contained in annex I to the Secretary-General's report (A/63/119) and urged the Fifth Committee to insert his proposals regarding retirees' salaries.

102. **The Chairman** said, on behalf of the Vice-Chairman of the Advisory Committee, that the Advisory Committee would provide answers to delegations' questions in writing.

103. **Mr. Cumberbatch** Miguén (Cuba) said that his delegation was well aware of the existence of administrative instruction ST/AI/416. His complaint was that the provisions of that instruction were being violated. Obviously, the Member States concerned had claimed that they were acting under the United Nations umbrella. Not only were such events becoming increasingly frequent, but the participants were becoming increasingly aggressive. The Organization would do well to consider its reputation.

104. In certain cases, Cuba and other Latin American delegations had disagreed with the Spanish translation and/or interpretation of a particular phrase. He reiterated the importance of reaching out to all professional Spanish-language associations and language institutions in particular. He would be grateful if the Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management would forward another copy of his letter to the Mission of Cuba.

105. **Mr. Safaei** (Islamic Republic of Iran) said that either there were no guidelines telling participants what they could and could not do on United Nations premises, or there were guidelines, but participants were not given a briefing. He would appreciate clarification.

106. **Mr. Shaaban** (Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management) said that the Department always advised requesting missions that their event should not violate the principles of the Organization. However, it was not the Department's responsibility to issue passes or monitor the content of meetings. He firmly rejected the accusation that someone in the Secretariat was acting improperly. The person responsible for authorizing events was, in fact, himself.

The meeting rose at 12.45 p.m.